The Core of the Regional Struggle: Actors or Camps?

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The Middle East, which is generally regarded as a distinct regional system, is characterized by much multi-dimensional diversity. This article examines the contribution of the "camps model" to a description of the regional dynamics while pointing to some of its most prominent lacunae, and suggests initial directions for a supplementary "strategic hedging model" that stresses the interests and preferences of the political actors. Underlying the supplementary model is the premise that the Middle East is a decentralized system in which the respective actors, state and non-state, are themselves at the center. This conceptual approach demonstrates the limitations of the camps model, which occasionally exceed its analytical contribution.

Keywords: Middle East, regional upheaval, national security, regional system, strategic hedging

Introduction

The area stretching from Morocco in the west to Iran in the east, and from Turkey in the north to Sudan in the south, is currently divided into 21 sovereign states and numerous sub-state entities, and characterized by a wide variety of fault lines, which lay the foundations for rivalries of local, regional, and even international importance. The populations of the region and the regional states—Arabs, Persians, Turks, Kurds, Jews, and others—can be classified by ethnic origin; by religion and sect: Muslim—Sunna, Shia, and others, Christians, Jews, and more; by political structure, usually monarchies versus "republics," or degrees of dictatorship versus democracy; by geographical alignment—Levant, Maghreb, Gulf, and so on; by division that puts states on one side and non-state or semi-state organizations on the other; and finally, by blocs, axes, or camps, based on their stance toward Israel and/or the West, or their ideological orientation, above all the various shades of political Islam.

Upheavals in the Arab world since 2010 have led to far-reaching changes in the region's regimes and the dynamics that drive them, as well as in the theories that seek to explain those realities. For example, there is the attempt to capture the regional picture from the angle of the failed state phenomenon, to define the causes and features of this phenomenon in each of the Arab states and its expansion in the area, and to assess its significance and consequences in the regional and international context in general, and with respect to Israel in particular. Itai Brun and Sarah Feuer presented a system-wide model on the shape of the Middle East. The model represents a refined, updated, and more detailed version of the four camps model, which Brun developed when he was head of the Research and Analysis Division of the IDF Intelligence Directorate (Aman).

Brun and Feuer's model contributes to an understanding of the complex dynamics of the Middle East, and we adopt some of its elements. However, in the following article we take issue with the emphasis on the division into four camps as a central definition of the regional order, and propose supplementing it with the strategic hedging model regarding regional actors, both state and sub-state. In our eyes, the strength of actors in the region, and above all the middle powers, is more significant than the inter-camp dynamic.

The Four Camps Model

Strategic Survey for Israel for the years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), include chapters that describe the regional dynamic at the system level. They argue that the region is characterized by "the contest between four clusters of actors wishing to see a regional order emerge that will reflect their interests on a variety of core issues: Iranian influence, relations with the West, territorial integrity of states, political Islam, sectarianism, and modes of governance." The four camps are:

a. The radical Shiite axis led by Iran (in 2020-2021 it was indeed called "the Iran-led axis"), which includes Syria under Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, the Shiite militias operating in various Middle East arenas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (notwithstanding its Sunni identity).
b. The Sunni Islamists camp, which includes the supporters of political Islam in the guise of the Muslim Brotherhood: Turkey, Qatar, Hamas, and what remains of the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere in the region. The camp is not united and its regional influence has declined.
c. The jihadists, which include the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda terrorist organizations. In recent year this camp has suffered severe blows.
d. The Sunni pragmatic states, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf states (apart from Qatar), and Morocco. These elements promote a pro-Western, anti-Iranian, anti-

Islamist, and nationalist vision, under authoritarian governments.

This division and its central position in the characterization of the Middle East following the Arab Spring (since 2010) continue the line of analysis presented by Brun from the INSS podium in 2014. Brun and Feuer explain that "the classification of these camps is not meant to suggest that their competing visions of a regional order constitute the only, or even in some cases the primary, factor motivating their actions," and that "the competing camps are not only distinct from one another; they also differ in kind."

Criticism of the Four Camps Model

There are many elements in the Brun and Feuer model that contribute to an understanding of the region: the need to look at the Middle East from a prism of systemic analysis, the struggle as the regional architecture, and the assertion that the present time is an interim period toward a new regional order, whose features are still unknown. Yet while their model is an important contribution to the ability to analyze processes in the Middle East in an age of rapid change, the rigid definition of camps requires further examination. More specifically, one layer of analysis, while mentioning the struggle between the public and their rulers, and the inter-camp struggle at the system level, fails to distinguish the particular interests of the different regional political actors. Moreover, the specific division into four camps presents difficulties, at an epistemological level (is the definition as camps an effective paradigm), and at an ontological level (do these camps actually exist, and is the ideological struggle between them indeed the main force driving regional dynamics).

Regarding the epistemological level, all too often the names given to camps in Middle East Studies blur the reality and hinder a deeper insight. For example, the most unified camp or alignment in the region is often called the "radical axis." This term was widespread after the Second Lebanon War, and joined other terms (such as the "Shiite crescent") that sought to group the enemies of Israel/the United States under a catchy negative label. Although this is the most "homogenous" bloc of actors, the term "axis" clouds the central question regarding the nature of this bloc: does it comprise Iran and proxies that yield to its absolute authority, or is it a non-monolithic collection of groups with essential ideological and political differences (for example, Islamic Iran versus secular Syria, or Sunni Hamas versus Shiite Hezbollah), and different arenas of operation and rivals, some with mainly local agendas? The term "Iran-led axis" implies that the answer to this question is Iran and its proxies, while the regional reality is more complex.

The roots of the term "radical axis" lie in an American and Israeli attempt to categorize their enemies in the Middle East and elsewhere, but the label does not sufficiently reflect the regional dynamic.

The roots of the term "radical axis" lie in an American and Israeli attempt to categorize their enemies in the Middle East and elsewhere (North Korea), but the label does not sufficiently reflect the regional dynamic. The actors described as members of the axis change frequently and do not necessarily share many political interests. On the other hand, the term "axis of resistance," coined by regional actors to describe themselves, should be viewed differently. It essentially expresses defiance of the term "axis of evil" (used by former US President George W. Bush) and defines the alignment by its members negatively—by their opposition to the United States and Israel—rather than positively, i.e., by their shared ideas.

The terms "axis of resistance" or "radical Shiite axis" can help explain the links between the enemies of Israel and the United States or the mutual commitment between Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, manifested in Syria, for example.

However, the definitions of "axis" or "Shiite" do not contribute to an understanding of this grouping, its cohesion, or the chance of any rift within it. Syria under Bashar al-Assad was never Shiite (but secular), and even the demographic shifts of the last decade have not yet changed this identity. Even though the attempts to drive a wedge between Iran and the Assad regime, or between Iran and the Houthis, have failed, it is difficult to assert that members of the axis are held together by a shared ideology. Similarly, the attacks of September 11, 2001 showed that "moderate Sunnis" are not so moderate, insofar as the regimes of the Gulf states fostered Islamic extremism and more than once secured their own stability by funding extremist ideological movements, which worked to undermine stability in other parts of the world.

The division into four camps arose in the Israeli security establishment as a response to the events of the Arab Spring and the regional upheaval in 2011-2014. Previously, the accepted division was between the "axis of resistance" (or the pro-Shiite camp led by Iran) and the "moderate" states led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This dichotomous division distinguished between the regional actors that identified with Iran—the state enemy that presents the principal threat to Israel—and those that did not. The regional upheaval undermined the conviction underlying this division, by bringing to the fore other forces that threatened Israel's security interests, and the model was expanded from two camps to four.

Although the four camps model presents a more refined thesis compared to the dichotomous framework that preceded it, the conceptual roots of the previous idea are deeply embedded within the new approach. The older division split the Middle East into "against us" ("the radical axis") and "not against us" ("the moderate camp"), while the new approach has added two more blocs with different Islamist tones. Moreover, the terms "Islamist" and "jihadist" are not used by members of the camps to describe themselves, and they are essentially negative labels that imply strong ideological cohesion between groups that actually comprise a mixture of organizations. In this context, in their most recent article, Brun and Feuer were right to discard branding definitions in their descriptions of the four camps in favor of more neutral terms.

At the ontological level, it is possible to point to a number of weaknesses in the description of the situation and dynamics of the Middle East by means of the four camps model in its current format:

a. The model confuses the conceptual struggles for the shape of the Middle East with the forms assumed by groups that organize to promote these ideas. Brun and Feuer try to bridge the tension between the two by explaining that "the competing visions of the regional order" are not necessarily the main factor driving the actors, there are many differences in the nature of the camps, and sometimes members of the same camp are hostile to each other. They have difficulty in formulating clear visions, whether positive or negative, that unite the members of the various camps, and this is particularly apparent with respect to the "Iran-led camp" or the anti-Iranian Sunni states. It is also possible to argue with the statement that "Sunni Islamists" are a camp whose regional strength has declined. The underlying idea that "Islam is the solution" retains a strong grip in many parts of the Middle East.
b. The model assumes that the ideological resemblance, if it indeed exists, between the world views of the actors creates shared interests and makes it easier for them to cooperate. This assumption is not valid for the jihadists, for example, and even among the "Sunni pragmatic states" there are deep disagreements around particular interests and personal conflicts. The model focuses on assigning the actors to camps, and does not provide a response to the discussion on the cohesiveness of the camps, or on

what unites or divides the actors assigned to each. It does not examine the viewpoint of each actor (state/group/organization) to see how central the camp is to its identity, compared to links and interests relating to actors outside the camp.

c. The model makes no reference to countries such as Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq, which only appear as arenas for struggle between the camps; the model does not deal with Kurds or Christians, or with Algeria, Tunisia, Oman, Sudan, Kuwait, and others. Israel is described by Brun and Feuer as a partner of the Arab Sunni camp, in spite of its important cooperation with Turkey and Qatar, and previously it even had some "joint ventures" with jihadist organizations in southern Syria.
d. The model does not deal with other competing ideas in the Middle East, e.g., secularism, ethnic differentiation, democratization, and more. This is based on a tacit assumption (that requires proof) that these ideas are on the sidelines of the Middle East agenda.
e. The model ignores the fact that some of the actors in the Middle East are part of systems or sub-systems that reach outside the region: Turkey—Europe and the Caucasus; the Gulf states—the Horn of Africa and the Indian subcontinent; North African countries—part of the African system and with links to Europe; Iran—the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.

The division into an Arab Sunni camp and an Islamist Sunni camp also blurs the differences between members of the camps and cross-cooperation:

a. Although Turkey is indeed the largest and most prominent country espousing a Muslim Brotherhood ideology, there are other important elements of the Turkish leadership overlooked by this label, such as Turkish (and even pan-Turkish) nationalism and populism. And while Turkey nurtures the Muslim Brotherhood as a mechanism for expanding its influence, this is not a clearly dominant element in its regional approach. Even the inclusion of Qatar in this camp is not natural, in view of the wealthy emirate's high level of maneuverability and the independent foreign policy it has adopted since 1995. The description of Qatar as identifying absolutely with the Muslim Brotherhood does not accord with its strategic goals, with its opportunism, or with the religious outlook of its leadership and citizens (the religious stream in the emirate is Wahhabism, as preached by the House of Saud). Qatar's history proves that in most cases the pragmatic element of its foreign policy overrides the ideological element.
b. Within the "pragmatic" camp there are rivalries, and alliances are sometimes made ad hoc, according to the context and specific interests of the parties. Therefore this camp has so far not managed to build a united, solid front against Iran and its allies, and its members are divided over how they view each other, the great powers, and Israel. For example, the two leading members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have different foreign policies and sometimes significantly clashing interests. Over the past decade these countries were partners in driving regional processes, such as the rise of Egyptian President el-Sisi (2014), the war in Yemen (2015), cooperation with the Trump administration, and the boycott of Qatar (2017). But also evident is how they hedge risks based on differing interests and constraints, and adopt different policies on a range of issues and countries. For example, the UAE withdrew most of its forces from Yemen, leaving Saudi Arabia to face the Houthis alone. The UAE also agreed to normalization with Israel, although in this case there was at least coordination with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, there has been a material change in Saudi policy toward Qatar, as shown for example in the Gulf reconciliation agreement brokered by Saudi

Arabia in January 2021, notwithstanding the hesitancy from the UAE, which still sees Doha and its policies as a threat.

The strength of the four camps model lies in its simplicity, but this is also its weakness: there is a heightened risk of including erroneous insights in the description of the regional reality and the interests guiding its actors. Brun and Feuer themselves argue that the logic of camps is not necessarily the organizing idea for the actors involved. The model polarizes the picture in a way that makes it hard to identify opportunities, unions, alliance cohesion, and also hampers exposure of the ability to form coalitions in order to deal with threats. The model does not show the multitude of interests of actors for whom identifying with a camp is sometimes of limited importance, if any. The model only partly covers the region and does not contribute to an understanding of how many actors maintain their position and function outside the camps.

The model that we propose to develop focuses on each actor and its strategic priorities. Countries generally hedge risks in order to maximize their benefits and to avoid damage. Consequently they can be part of one camp and simultaneously in another camp.

The four camps model is based on mistaken conceptual roots of labeling rivals and categorizing threats. Presenting the actors as an "axis" or a "camp" makes them appear too unified/monolithic, and therefore leads to an inaccurate picture of the Middle East. The model focuses on the religious and ideological differences between the camps while ignoring other important features and considerations, including realism and geo-strategy, which carry more weight for the actors themselves. The model tends to highlight the power of the system in the Middle East, while it appears that the region is largely decentralized, and that the most important layer of analysis is the actors themselves—both states and sub-state entities.

For these reasons, the camps model is limited in its ability to assist in the identification of future developments. The foregoing analysis highlights the need for a supplementary model that focuses on the actors. Important actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Israel, and not the camps, are what generate the main dynamic of the region.

A Proposed Supplementary Model

In our eyes, an analysis of the layer of state and sub-state actors does not detract from the description of the Middle East as a system, and does not ignore the ideological gaps or the tendency of actors to group together in what are described as camps. Brun and Feuer likewise maintain that the regional order is lack of order, and that sometimes, for various considerations, the camps are less important to the actors.

A supplementary model can address the tension between political logic and simplified ideologies; the central struggles; the range of commitment to the various struggles; the links between the different actors and their respective strengths; and a demonstration of Israel's place in the system. Such an analysis could facilitate the identification and assessment of the potential for changes in attitudes to the main questions that interest Israel. Moreover, the net assessment and estimate of the reality's potential for change must be separate from the analysis of Israeli interests.

The model that we propose to develop focuses on each actor and its strategic priorities. Countries generally hedge risks in order to maximize their benefits and to avoid damage. Consequently they can be part of one camp and simultaneously in another camp whose members have a different outlook and conflicting interests, according to the four camps model. This claim is based on the following findings:

a. States may be assigned to one camp based on a specific category/parameter and to another camp by a different criterion, or move from one camp to another.
b. Within the camps there is competition and even rivalry for regional status and influence, also involving economic interests.
c. There are many silent actors who appear to belong formally to a particular camp, and pose as neutral.
d. The region is characterized by a multiplicity of rivalries, whose importance varies from actor to actor.

Three main strategies can reinforce the bargaining power of a state/sub-state political entity, certainly if it is small:

a. Loyalty: An actor can present itself as a loyal ally, by stressing its contribution to the security of its allies and what they have in common—shared values or interests—and minimizing any differences. An actor that demonstrates absolute loyalty to the interests and values of its senior partner does so in the hope of achieving concessions or dividends. The problem with such a policy is that the leader of the alliance may come to believe that there is no need for any investment on its part, since its junior partner is committed to the relationship in any case, and it could therefore avoid any obligation. It is hard to find a policy of absolute loyalty, since all actors have a clear preference for increasing independence.
a. Blackmail: Actors seeking to gain from an alliance can do so by highlighting challenging areas where the ally's assistance is needed, for example, by exaggerating the risk of collapse of a friendly regime, as Bahrain has done. An ad hoc blackmail attempt might damage the weaker partner and make its position worse, but if so, the stronger partner will feel that its interests in maintaining the status quo are essential, and then it will respond to demands from the weaker party in order to avoid damaging the relationship.
b. Neutrality: Junior partners can adopt a more independent line, to a limited extent, through contacts and even by receiving aid from rivals or by emphasizing their neutrality. But they must be consistent in order to show themselves as reliable rather than opportunistic. Qatar is an excellent example of this strategy, having adopted a large degree of independence in its foreign policy. Describing an alliance in these colors turns the spotlight on the high costs of a strong force to maintain the alliance. The cost of reinforcing it sometimes outweighs the benefit of its dividends. For a weak actor, the ability to influence its stronger partner may become the most important element, joining its security advantage over its rival.

The regional actors in the Middle East are in no hurry to be linked to camps and wish to retain maximum freedom of maneuverability. The literature on international relations does not mention the possibility that actors might try to grasp both ends of the stick through "bandwagoning"—(with the source of threat), and simultaneously balancing (against a source of threat). But maintaining some independence in the ally's foreign relations could be an efficient method for a weak actor, certainly if it wishes to create the impression that it might tilt its policy toward a third party that the stronger ally sees as a real or potential competitor.

This gives the weaker actor some leverage over the stronger actor and improves its situation. Smaller actors can seek the role of balancer by changing loyalties, thus preventing either party from gaining the upper hand. They will use this strategy to increase their security by avoiding a potential war and finding other options for exercising influence.

Actors adopt "mixed" behavior that includes both balancing and bandwagoning elements. This is contrary to the neo-realist assumption that actors will choose either to balance or to bandwagon in order to deal with a given threat. This leaves them considerable room to maneuver when they face a threat in conditions

of uncertainty. The use of this concept appears relevant and effective in view of the difficulty of finding "purely" balancing or bandwagoning conduct. As a rule, it is correct to see balancing and bandwagoning as the extremes of an axis along which states choose their preferred strategy, based on an understanding that a policy that leans too far in the direction of either extreme would damage their security in certain situations.

The division into camps is mainly characteristic of the traditional Israeli viewpoint and is not found, certainly to the same extent, in the strategic thinking among Israel's neighbors or the great powers.

This "mixed" strategy allows members of an alliance to simultaneously maintain significant links with the threatening force. It also enables them to create leverage to influence outside parties, particularly if they can highlight the fact that they are sitting on the fence. In a situation of great uncertainty and little room for error, the attempt to avoid harm and survive becomes paramount, even at a high price with damage to unity and consequently to the effectiveness of any alliance. Thus, a strategy of hedging risks allows the member of a camp or coalition to continue its links with the threatening element that led to the coalition in the first place. This type of behavior is clearly seen in the actions of many Arab Gulf states toward Iran, some of which, particularly Qatar and Oman, have perfected the strategy over the years. However, this strategy is not free of costs, sometimes considerable, to the actor who tries to dance at all weddings, including costs from its coalition partners.

Strategic hedging is designed to address the restrictions imposed on actors as they wish to act independently of stronger powers, with an attempt to keep as many options open as possible. Although this strategy involves some investment (in several and at times opposing directions at the same time), it can improve their security situation and limit the chances of strategic surprises, because it shortens the way to full balancing or bandwagoning. The rationale: it enables the weaker partner of an alignment to maintain relations with the threatening entity and thus reduce the danger of conflict in the short term, while preserving the alignment, and thus the ability to deal with the long term threat. Further formulation of rules on this subject will address the gap in the theory and clarify something about the strategic preferences of small/weak states.

In the literature dealing with strategy and international relations, particularly in recent years, greater space has been allocated to this kind of "mixed" approach, known as strategic hedging, which suggests an alternative explanation for relations between powers, but also for the actions of small states. Assigning actors to sharply defined camps involves over-generalization, since in fact, although belonging to a given camp, actors adopt an independent policy contrary to the homogenous label applied to the camp (the "Islamist axis" or the "pragmatic camp"). The aim is to maximize their strategic position while adjusting to a rapidly changing reality.

Partners in a camp or coalition may adopt different strategies to improve their security, because they cannot be sure of the intentions of their partners and because the interests of allies can never fully overlap. In fact, between absolute abandonment and full cooperation there is a space that actors can exploit in order to improve what they see as their security situation. Strategic hedging allows states, particularly small ones, or sub-state actors to maintain a good portion of all their relations with the threatening element and thus reduce the danger of a conflict in the short term, while retaining a "plan B" to respond to uncertainty regarding relations with them in the long term.

The underlying rationale of the four camps model is the assumption that it can explain past and present behaviors and forecast the

future with respect to states in the same camp. In practice, its ability to explain and predict the behavior of regional actors wanes in light of the Middle East system and ways the global system affects it. Moreover, the division into camps is mainly characteristic of the traditional Israeli viewpoint and is not found, certainly to the same extent, in the strategic thinking among Israel's neighbors or the great powers, where countries were and still are the most important units of analysis and the basis of the principal realist and neo-realist perceptions in the study of international relations.

The explanatory strength of the model we propose is significant for a number of prominent factors: the extremism of the international system, which in itself reinforces the trend toward hedging; the accelerating speed of developments, which leads to changing circumstances that are the basis of ad hoc groupings that in turn increase the temptation for strategic hedging; the erosion of ideological barriers and growing pragmatism ("everything is OK"); multiplying challenges at home and particularly for autocratic regimes, which facilitate and sometimes demand different risk management in foreign relations; too much importance attributed to personal ties between leaders in contrast to camp unity.

In conclusion, the Middle East is chaotic, with many actors acting according to different rationales and dynamically forming temporary groupings. A deep understanding of processes in the region cannot be based solely on the prism of rigid camps, since the sub-camp forces, particularly of the state level, are stronger than that. Combining the strategic hedging model with the camps model can help provide a better understanding of the regional situation. For example, in our estimation it will give a better understanding of changes in the policies of some actors, and a different analysis of the nature of groupings, their cohesion, and the chances of any rift developing.

We can illustrate the principles of the strategic hedging model through analysis of the policies of two central actors in the region, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as they attempt to deal with the changes they expect in the regional balance of power. The entry of President Biden to the White House, his different agenda (including criticism of allies), and above all the accelerated negotiations with Iran on nuclear matters are all central factors in a process whose outcome, as those states see it, could be a change for the worse in the balance of power.

In this framework, in the first half of 2021 Saudi Arabia reconciled with Qatar, proposed far-reaching concessions to the Houthis in Yemen, began a direct political dialogue with Iran, and is apparently seeking to normalize relations with the Assad regime in Syria. Riyadh is worried that if the talks between the United States and Iran are successful, this will strengthen the regional standing of Iran and its allies. In order to curb even slightly the possible consequences for its own status and influence, Saudi Arabia is seeking talks with Iran.

In the first half of 2021 Turkey also moved in the direction of political pragmatism with respect to its relations with countries in a competing camp. For example, it announced a series of initiatives to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and even the United Arab Emirates. More specifically, there have been a number of telephone conversations between the Turkish President and the King of Saudi Arabia, and the Turkish Foreign Minister visited the kingdom in May. As for Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood television channels that are active in Turkey have been instructed to soften their criticism of Cairo, and in early May a Turkish delegation arrived in Egypt, the first since 2013. These political signals, which do not match the rigid camps structure, represent a strategy that serves Turkey's particular interests and its need to reduce regional tension, limit damage, and establish its influence wherever possible.

We have thus tried to supplement the systemic analysis of the Middle East order and propose an additional angle for examining processes and trends. We indicate

the weakness of the four camps model as the dominant element for explaining and predicting political processes in the region, and propose a supplementary model that focuses on the layer of political actors. The large number of exceptions to the demarcation lines between the camps sharpens the need for a model such as the one proposed here, which also facilitates description and analysis of the gray areas. Refining and implementing this model and using it alongside the camps model will contribute to more meticulous and accurate description and analysis of the regional system, and to the assessment of possible trends and developments.

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Prof. (emeritus) Aharon Klieman, who contributed a great deal to the thinking about the concept of strategic hedging.

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